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Nearly All School District Policies for Foods Sold Outside of Meals Fall Short of Nation's Dietary Guidelines

New Study Helps Inform Efforts to Update National Nutrition Standards for Snack Foods and Beverages Sold in Schools

Chicago, April 20, 2012 – Fewer than 5 percent of school districts nationwide required foods and drinks sold outside of meals during the 2009–10 school year to meet all of the recommendations of the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, according to a study published today in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*. The study examined district-level policies for foods and beverages sold to students through vending machines, à la carte cafeteria lines and school stores. These snacks and drinks are sometimes called “competitive foods” because they compete with school meals for students’ spending.

Nutrition guidelines for such foods and beverages varied greatly among districts, but overall, policies for elementary school students were stronger than those for middle and high school students. For example, while 41 percent of policies at the elementary school level set limits on the sugar content of products sold in vending machines, only 19 percent of policies at the high school level did the same.

“Most districts allow schools to sell snacks and drinks that have more sugar, fat or sodium than what’s recommended by the 2010 Dietary Guidelines,” said senior study author Jamie F. Chriqui, PhD, MHS. Chriqui is an investigator with [Bridging the Gap](#), a research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which funded the study. “Stronger federal regulations would help ensure uniformity across districts nationwide and provide guidance for districts seeking to enhance their existing snack food and beverage standards.”

Currently, federal regulations for competitive foods only limit the availability of foods of minimal nutritional value, such as carbonated drinks and certain candies, sold in the cafeteria during meal times. In the coming months, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is expected to release new proposed standards for competitive foods. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 authorized USDA to set nutrition standards that are aligned with the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for all foods and drinks available outside of school meals. This study documents how existing school district policies for those products measure up to recommendations of the 2010 Dietary Guidelines.

The study, “The Extent to Which School District Competitive Food and Beverage Policies Align with the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans: Implications for Federal Regulations,” analyzed competitive food and beverage policies for the 2009–10 school year from a nationally representative sample of 622 districts. The researchers examined how the policies addressed

various nutritional requirements of the 2010 Dietary Guidelines, including recommended limits for sugar, fat, trans fat and sodium in foods, as well as the availability of sugary drinks and high-fat milks.

Other key findings from the study include:

- District policies most commonly addressed the fat content of snack foods—36 percent, 32 percent and 25 percent of policies at the elementary, middle and high school levels, respectively, required specific limits for fat.
- There was slightly less focus on sugar—21 percent of policies at the elementary and middle school levels and 13 percent of policies at the high school level required specific limits for the sugar content of snack foods.
- Districts have been diligent about prohibiting regular soda across all grade levels, but more lenient with other sugary drinks and high-fat milks.
 - Forty-three percent of policies at the elementary and middle school levels and 35 percent of policies at the high school level banned regular soda sales anywhere in school.
 - Only 15 percent, 5 percent and 2 percent of policies at those respective levels banned sugar-sweetened beverages other than soda.
 - Fewer than 10 percent of all districts prohibited whole and 2% milk.
- Only 4 percent of all districts required fruits, vegetables and/or whole grains to be sold in competitive venues.
- District guidelines focus more heavily on vending machines than other venues. For example, 41 percent of policies at the elementary school level required limits on the sugar content of foods sold in vending machines, 33 percent had a similar requirement for school stores, and 27 percent had one for à la carte lines.

“Our findings reveal specific areas where districts’ nutritional guidelines fall short of national recommendations,” said Chriqui. “It’s critical for USDA to be aware of this as it updates standards for snack foods and beverages in schools. We’ve also identified strong district policies that could serve as models for USDA to consider because they encourage schools to offer healthy snacks and drinks.”

The authors suggest that USDA’s proposed competitive foods rule focus on establishing stronger nutrition guidelines for middle and high school students; setting specific limits for all sugar-sweetened beverages and the fat content of milk; and making fruits, vegetables and whole grains more available.

“We’re encouraged by the recent momentum to improve school meals, but we still need strong national standards for snack foods and drinks offered outside of meals,” said C. Tracy Orleans, PhD, senior scientist at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “Kids spend a lot of time at school, and many of them buy snacks and drinks throughout the day. Our goal is to ensure that they have healthy choices.”

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About Bridging the Gap

Bridging the Gap is a nationally recognized research program dedicated to improving the understanding of how policies and environmental factors influence diet, physical activity and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. For more information, visit www.bridgingthegapresearch.org.

About the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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